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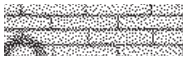

The Condemned

The presentation offered in the previous chapter, on the mental effects of the Algerian civil war and the various complexes produced by the conflict, confirms my argument that colonial war had a profound effect on Fanon's clinical practice, and yet in many respects those effects were mostly theoretical. Anyone who reads those case histories will see Fanon struggling to define what it means to live a truly liberated life when one ceases to be treated as a human being, and when one's life can be disposed of as a mere petrified remnant that others can do with what they please. The decolonial struggle could not liberate such persons from what was making them ill, nor prevent them from loving and hating in ways that made them suffer their obsessions all the more. Fanon's clinical work brought him very close to these subjects. These people, who had answered the call of the FLN and transferred their allegiance in such a way that they did not fear the settlers who had right and power over them, were often at greater risk from their own psyches than from their enemies. That the practices of the French military authorities had a direct impact on these mental crises is clear from what has been said above. I showed in Chapter Six ("Desire and Law") that, in the war zones and the cities, people—both those who fought and those who did not—fell victim to a range of dissociative disorders. For these subjects, unable to tell apart semblance from truth, punishment seemed like a kindness, and a kind remark the most egregious, fatal offence, proof of the dead's need of revenge. If the revolutionary struggle could restore sanity to those who could be so thoroughly stripped of their identity that they could undertake nothing without putting others at risk, Fanon's clinical experience suggested that the violence of this dis-

sociation could often be irrevocable. However, I believe that politically, he did not always accept that. It is in response to this ecstatic revolutionary movement toward liberation, where the whole relationship to the colony is reinvented, where every social relation enters into crisis and disorder (hence totally unlike political conflict and the legal form of its violence), where the space and time of the new nation produces both ascesis *and* excess (in which one can read meaning and that which is without sense), that the socially dead are meant to rejoin the ranks of the living. Such a view is more dialectical than it appears, in that it compels the distinction between the differing forms of violence adopted by the *colon* and *colonisé* and their changing relationship to the disorder from which a tabula rasa emerges. That this position does not quite agree with the clinical insights of the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* is clear, I think. Hence we must admit that this chapter revises many aspects of Fanon's political thought, which therefore arrives at a new concept of freedom and pathology.

To understand more precisely how far that concept extends, we should note that liberation does not merely consist in freeing people from their symptoms, but also involves the use of the struggle itself to forge a new group idea within the space of the clinic. It is not a question of posing a world gone mad as the cause of mass unreason, but of asking why the promise of freedom traumatizes those bereft of it (although they actively desire it). In short, within the very limits of language by which the new nation's speech is given, the need is to work at patiently tracing out a new psychopolitical form that is the new space of a *pathology* (the very essence of liberation as Fanon defines it); a pathology that would not destroy everything but that begins with a profound revolution in racial-imperial law (and the passions and fears that sustain it). The necessities of revolution call forth obligations that necessarily have to be fulfilled, imperatives of knowledge, method, and ideological reinvention—everything that comes last, and is now first. But there are numerous reasons why someone who decides to carry out those obligations may not be liberated by them: fear of revenge, dread that one is acting at the bidding of another, desire for punishment, the suspicion that everyone is simultaneously a stranger and enemy, or the feeling that one's existence is not real and that, for the same reason, the only real thing is one's secret desire to be a traitor. Whatever the reason, these case histories imply that the decision to join the decolonial struggle was never simply a decision for some, and simultaneously that the war for liberation formed part of an inner conflict that was both permanent and irresolvable. That conflict led

Fanon to ask the following question: how could these subjects free themselves from the shame and murderousness of their own desires? It was a problem uniquely present to Fanon's clinical work. For nowhere else did he come across subjects with a stronger will to endure than these Algerian subjects, whose desire for liberation held an intense fascination for him, with an equal portion of majesty and misery, and for which each citizen became the perpetual owner of their accursed share.

Apart from these reversals, whose impact stems from the emergence of psychoses, there is another aspect to this state of general disorder, a very important factor unique to them that must have discouraged Fanon from thinking about liberation or ever conceiving a desire to reinvent the colony. This is consideration of the question with which we began this book: why do people choose passivity rather than the life and strength of what could actively liberate them? It is not the question that Fanon felt needed to be asked of the FLN, but of those *colonisés* who refused to comply with the struggle or submit to it: whether their refusal was elicited by love, forced by fear, or came from some other motive, these subjects posed a challenge to him, one that mingled the therapeutic and the political. It is with these subjects that the early chapters of *The Wretched of the Earth* is mostly concerned, and mostly as an opposition between native and revolutionary culture.

This also very clearly emerges from the fact that at the outset of the conflict, the FLN was engaged in an ideological war of persuasion. They needed to understand why people refused their cause, or embraced it only half-heartedly, without conviction or resolution. Fanon's various answers to this question showed a native population under complete duress, whose collusion with the status quo was less a question of hegemony than of external constraint that was also a shock to the mind. Consequently, those forces that exerted the greatest pressure on the hearts and minds of the colonized had to be identified. We have already addressed the effects of torture in this context, including a system of detention and disappearances. Other significant factors helped to maintain the citizens in their passivity, as well as to obviate the civil war and remove causes of conflict. For example, no one was free to go from the native zone to that of the settler, each being subject to constant checks and arbitrary refusal and/or detention. The sense of one's racial separateness from that of citizen was almost categorical, an awareness constantly reinforced by a rancorous atmosphere through which the militarized zones viewed each other and vice versa. But the most potent factor was the strong discipline of obedience in which

they—the *colonisés*—were brought up. Here Fanon targets the role of indigenous culture in passages that have provoked the ire of the defenders of native culture, who conceive native tradition from the perspective of an authentic resistance to colonialism. For them, a sentence like the one following, from Fanon's essay "On Violence," is scandalous:

> Here we grasp the full significance of the all too familiar "head-in-the-sand" behavior at a collective level, as if this collective immersion in a fratricidal bloodbath suffices to mask the obstacle and postpone the inevitable alternative, the inevitable emergence of the armed struggle against colonialism. . . . [And more specifically,] in scaring me, the atmosphere of myths and magic operates like an undeniable reality. In terrifying me, it incorporates me into the traditions and history of my land and ethnic group, but at the same time I am reassured and granted a civil status, an identification. The secret sphere in underdeveloped countries is a collective sphere that falls exclusively within the realm of magic.[1]

With regard to these traditions, too readily thought to contribute the very armature of resistance, Fanon sees a magical series of compensations and punishments by which the *colonisés* spiritually indebt themselves. They (the *colonisés*) could not urinate, spit, or go out in the dark as and when they pleased, but could only do so at certain times and at certain places, and only by following certain kinds of magical ritual at a particular time; again, they could only dance and sing in certain permissive circles at a particular time; their libido and ego without exception were subject to a continual, ritualized "pantomime" where "everything is permitted" but via a continuous practice of obedience (on this issue of magic ritual and ceremonies Fanon is adamant: "It is evident that everything is reduced to a permanent confrontation at the level of phantasy"[2]). Consequently, every aspect of native social life is prescribed according to a specific prescript of the law (of spirit). Another key factor seems to have been that at certain times of the year the *colonisés* were under obligation to devote themselves to "organized séances of possession and dispossession."[3] For Fanon such rituals played a "key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonial world"; it is thus through the phenomenon of spirit possession that the resentment, and violence, provoked by the crisis in the colony "are transformed, and spirited away."[4] By contrast, to the *colonisés* wholly accustomed to these rituals, the life of spirit must have appeared to be a profound freedom rather than subjugation, for "the magical, supernatural powers" whom they most feared, and whose rule over them they very much dreaded, "prove[d] to be surprisingly ego-boosting," and precisely because

such fear also promised the greatest psychological award.[5] And while it is impossible, of course, to know at which point faith turns into delusion, the problem is that the colonized are still subject to a sovereign power, which has various ways to ensure that they believe, love, hate, etc., what they are told to. Fanon's conclusion from this was that the peoples' complicity with such supernatural power did not result from the command to desire what was forbidden, but was, by virtue of everyday practices, experienced as a duty to obey only what was prescribed. Thus, without any logical contradiction, we can conceive of men who loved, ate, slept, danced, and so on, not because they were free to do so, but owing to the power of a supernatural command alone.

But why, then, do they turn away from what is admittedly a feared and seductively phantasmatic power to that of a secular leadership in the midst of a war, and one that carries the risk of death and madness? Fanon's response is to simply suggest that the usurpation by the real makes even fantasy impossible. The colonized do not necessarily convert to the FLN out of ideal conviction, therefore, or because freedom remained the great and arduous task of their existence, or because there remained insufficient strength in the colonized to bear their dire situation without the compensations of magic and religion, but more because of the character of colonialism and the obstinacy of racist superstition, which impinged on their most intimate experience.

On top of this, Fanon explicitly suggests that the outbreak of civil war forces nativism itself to change (it becomes a magical, genealogical sign united to a sense of tragic belatedness). Although we can envisage why people want to hold on to native tradition during times of crisis and change, such tradition will still never be so great as the power to decide what is native or what is purely originally construed to be so, with respect to which nativism is merely the desire, both in and after the fact, for an authentic *image* prior to colonialism. As I have already said, this partly explains why Fanon is so scathing of the reverence for nativist culture by bourgeois intellectuals who scrupulously keep up the unique cult of those rituals as the "oldest, inner essence" of the nation, a reification that preserves their psycho-affective equilibrium in the absence of combat.[6] Even though this essence has, from the first, been distorted, disfigured, or destroyed by colonialism, these intellectuals seek to rehabilitate native culture as a sacred icon, both of what came first and of what can be preserved as such (as a sign of pure traditionality), that is no less than an attempt to legitimize the

nationalist struggle as a supernatural struggle. The people may feel far less reverence for these traditions kept as remnants of a life prior to colonialism, but such skepticism matters little to the "secret hope" of the colonized intellectual, since only s/he can see the "magnificent and shining era" that redeems the spiritual vocation of the people as a nation.[7] Popular cultural nationalist movements hardly pose a threat here, since they pursue a reading of culture at the level of an *African* nativism rather than at the level of the nation-state. They had to try whatever they were commanded by the authority of this precolonial era or via the colonial structures that promoted native culture as a way of avoiding a genuine antagonism between the *colon* and *colonisé*. Suffice it to say, Fanon rejects these nationalist-nativist sentiments and the bourgeois elements that go with them, for reasons already discussed. I have now, I think, explained briefly but clearly the essential elements of these conserving, passive forces, preventing decolonial revolution.

Fanon had already mapped out all these worries and concerns in the section "By Way of a Conclusion" to *Black Skin, White Masks*; it remains now to inquire what he said there and how it affected his future work. So far we have addressed Fanon's clinical work as praxis, psychodrama, and as *social-thérapie*. However, in the concluding chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which has as its epigraph a quote from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, exhorting revolutionaries to draw their poetry from the content of the present rather than from the tragic expression of the past, Fanon raises the first of many questions concerning what I am here calling the pathology of nativist freedom. The link between this final chapter and the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* is not one that is often made. However, as I will point out, both chapters turn on the explicit connection between passivity and consent, and both examine the history and vicissitudes by which the nativist subject opts for greater security by avoiding the greater risk of exposing his or her own desire to the present struggles of the masses.

Since the problems of history have come up frequently—viz. Freud, Sartre, trauma, repetition, etc.—let us start there. Now although the cultural conflict over the language (and concept) of nativism is somewhat distant from Fanon's critical outlook in "By Way of a Conclusion," it is still very much to the point. The schema or concept of black modernity, as the overcoming of a certain non-awareness of black civilization via its nativist negation, is the means by which Fanon conducts his examination of a new black historical consciousness (of time), and how this allows for the establishment of a new cultural spirit that claims to overcome or renew

the diremptions of blackness (identified by Hegel, but also by so many canonic texts of white modernity), which posits the black as the *not-yet* historical, not-yet conceptual part of the critical-negative work of spirit. In the relation between white philosophy and blackness, the international movement known as negritude played a symptomatic and often paradoxical role in Fanon's thinking. Negritude is judged as still too traditionally Hegelian—in the sense that the development of a black consciousness is shown to be the overcoming of a white consciousness by recombining what has been separated: i.e., the (black) nativist essence alienated from itself by (white) technico-theoretical reason, but now rejoined through the spiritual-historical form of negritude. It is traditionally Hegelian, or more accurately Bergsonian, in so far as the concept of historical time has its true abode in racial spirituality as somehow a pre-technical *Dasein*, or as the sign of historical evolution more generally.[8]

If we compare the critical, dialectical, racially essentialist (because uncritically romantic) concept of negritude advanced by people like Césaire (with caveats) and Senghor with Fanon's concluding text, then at first sight, Fanon's text appears deeply critical, albeit in a way that may well appear as regressive. The first impression you receive of Fanon's text is that of an anti-historicist emphasis on non-racial identity, which would be very remote from the romantic genealogy of negritude, in which precolonial Africa is held up as the spiritual origin of black modernity. Indeed, as you read "By Way of a Conclusion," you will have been struck by Fanon's emphasis on a new phrasing of modern blackness, continuing Marx's reflections in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that the past is always charged with the time of the now, which interrupts the continuum of history. The reference here is to a new genealogical concept of blackness that is opposed to nihilism in the sense that Fanon gives it, but nonetheless turns on the meaning of freedom as a pathological deception not of blackness but of time. The problem of the reception of Fanon often centers on this problem of time, but only infrequently on decolonialism as a figure for the end of blackness as a pathological event.

We can now ask the simplest question: what does pathology have to do, in the most immediate sense possible, with blackness? Although this question might seem unnecessary, or redundant, it seems that, in the sense of Fanon's concluding remarks to *Black Skin, White Masks*, interpreters have found it very difficult to justify or excuse what Fanon means by this word "pathology," so much so that Fanon's diagnosis is taken to be more patho-

logical than the symptom of what he is in fact analyzing. This is an odd situation, because Fred Moten and Jared Sexton,[9] the two commentators whose readings I will be using as my examples here, are in fact very powerful readers of Fanon, who should be able to tell the difference between what Fanon means when he says that the black abnormalizes himself and the claim that blackness is pathological (which is what Moten, who demands a naïve reading of Fanon, thinks he is saying). There are, to some extent, obvious empirical answers one can give to correct these assessments. But the very asymmetry between remedy and diagnosis deserves further interpretation. Let us begin by engaging with what Fanon actually says. There are four key interrelated elements to his argument: the first establishes black pathology through a discussion of black nihilism, the second draws out the implications of black *ressentiment*, the third develops some of the more philosophical implications of what it means to *be* black (which I address via a more extensive discussion of Moten and Sexton), and the fourth deals with the aporias of this consent in the form of the *n'est pas*.

All concern, without explicitly saying so, the following question: what does it mean for someone to *choose* to be black, not out of loyalty, virtue, or conviction, but rather as a form of unconscious consent? Anyone who has read Fanon will know that this question is not easy to ascertain or answer, and one that will require an effort of reading. As an example, consider the black neurotics in Fanon's first book who, rather like the paranoiacs at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, are wholly and wretchedly oppressed by their own desire, who *know* that everyone is whispering bad things about them to the extent that they have access to their secretly guarded inner truth and so know that they are race traitors, a truth that remains largely unthought but that they perform, necessarily and repeatedly, and by which they essentially condemn themselves, in what seems like a second betrayal. Notably envious of those who, they imagine, have never had to bear such a burden, but hostile and hateful towards those who would relieve them of it or, worse, declare themselves to delight in it, these subjects are the same subjects who recoil at the idea of being *nègre*.

There is no need to pursue this analogy here, as I have already discussed this connection between feelings of guilt and the suspicion that prompts anger, rage, and resentment in a mind in crisis. The task here, to anticipate my argument, is to ask why people feel compelled to inhibit what could liberate them from their present, unbearable situation, a problem that gives us another opportunity to ask: who would prefer to be *nègre*?

1. HISTORY; THE FUTURE PERFECT

The first part of the argument is relatively straightforward. In common with Sartre, Sorel, Nietzsche, and others, Fanon assigns a slavish attitude to the past, one that is so overwhelmed and oppressed by the present, especially with respect to life in the colony, that it can only present a miserable picture of the colonial present, in which only the precolonial is seen as proper (or primary). Fanon, more simply, says: "the black man, however sincere, is a slave to the past"; and "I do not want to sing the past to the detriment of my present and my future."[10]

One of the reasons for which Fanon takes the idea of negritude to task—namely, the manner in which it ties blackness to an absence not of sense but of historical sensibility—is due to what Fanon presents as the intellectual failure of the native bourgeoisie (who in many aspects substitutes a poetry of the past for the political struggles of the present). To become the expression of the future, negritude must give up this search for a lost cultural past whose greatness has been hidden or masked by colonialism and whose external ruination necessarily leads to a dead, ossified present judged to be secondary and derivative with respect to what is deemed properly, essentially, and intimately black. If one can think of negritude as it is described by Fanon as an identification with what can only be possessed as the loss of what was originally essential, then one can see why Fanon criticizes negritude for having established contact with blackness as a lost inheritance, wherein the only certitude of what it means to be black is thus lost from the beginning. In Senghor there are statements in that direction.[11] But closer to home, an example of someone who cannot, by definition, bear the shock of being *nègre*, who can never rest easy with the idea that blackness is nothing but *nègre*, including what he himself is, is the native bourgeois intellectual, whom Fanon reads with a great deal of antipathy and whose substitution of a black secular historicism for that of the antagonisms of the present is seen as part of a complex historical dialectic. Since race is the highest historical concept for the negritude intellectual, which then dovetails with the religious, spiritual concept of its vocation, it follows that the colonial present can only be thought, not in terms of hope or transvaluation, but from the purview of despair, or of nihilism, in which every black existent is talked about in the same terms of loss, failure, and deviation.

The question then becomes why this slavish attitude is for Fanon exemplary of a bourgeois delusion. The question also becomes one of how

the black bourgeoisie-intelligentsia differs from the wretched, and here Fanon is categorical in asserting that the bourgeoisie is radically unlike, differs essentially from both the lumpenproletariat and the radical black artist-thinker. This is a curious thing to say, because one assumes (and obviously it is the case) that some of the qualities that Fanon so admires in Césaire are similar to those qualities necessary for a radically new black poetics (as Fanon's reading of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* demonstrates). It suffices in this respect that there is a tension in Fanon's reading of negritude as an aesthetic and as a representation of blackness. If the former is the degraded petit-bourgeois form of an unhappy consciousness, the latter is valued for offering glimpses into a blackness proper to its age, seen here as the form most appropriate to racial capitalist dehumanization. The tension does not mean that the aesthetic and the poetry are therefore founded on the same beliefs. The sensibility that defines bourgeois racial attitudes to black art subtracts the artistic effect of form from the social history that produces it. Black art can be valued because its form reestablishes the link to the nativist original from which, in principle, the contaminations of the present have been excluded. As such, the evolution of blackness as representation is disregarded in favor of the inner freedom that the artistic ideal of blackness as spirit calls for. That absorption bears witness, as Fanon emphasizes, to an *aesthetic* nihilism in the present. The assertion is so striking, so shocking in a way, that here again the critics are not sure whether to affirm or deny it. Fanon fully accepts (according to Sexton)

> the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows *itself* through that imposition, rather than remaining in a reactive stance that insists on the (temporal, moral, etc.) heterogeneity between a self and an imago originating in culture. Though it may appear counterintuitive, or rather because it is counterintuitive, this acceptance or affirmation is active; it is a willing or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death.[12]

Moten, meanwhile, writes:

> A set of impossible questions ought to ensue from what may well be Fanon's pathological insistence on the pathological: Can resistance come from such a location? Or perhaps more precisely and more to the point, can there be an escape from that location; can the personhood that defines that location also escape that position? What survives the kind of escape that ought never to leave the survivor intact? If and when something emerges from such a place, can it be anything other

than pathological? But how can the struggle for liberation of the pathological be aligned with the eradication of the pathological? . . . It is crucial, however, that this set of questions that Fanon ought to have asked are never really posed.[13]

Here we should note that although Moten and Sexton are ostensibly writing about Fanon, the matter of their dispute is informed by another debate that both constantly refer to, which turns on what it means to read blackness optimistically or pessimistically, and the onto-political consequences that follow. Now the fact that Fanon has been chosen to exercise this debate, including the fundamental ways in which blackness can be thought in relation to anti-blackness, and hence the entire meaning of black social life and black social death, is no coincidence. The sole difference between these two readings is how, consequently, Fanon is used to think blackness as a *political* possibility, whereas in the case of my reading, what matters is how both readings reveal how their versions of Fanon are ruled by a certain economy of representations, in which, for example, the strategically justified claim to offer a reading of Fanon involves further questions of interpretation and history for which Fanon is the substitute or stand-in, a substitution that makes Fanonism itself part of an undecidable series of displacements. However, this undecidability does not diminish the importance of these two readings but on the contrary increases it. The point here is not just to play Moten *against* Sexton, but to show how both, at strategically important moments, depend on the words of Fanon to understand black optimism and pessimism, and black optimism *as* pessimism, and in ways that render both neither decidable nor identifiable from a reading of Fanon alone. But the fact that in so doing both readings leave open the possibility of an optimistic or pessimistic reading (of blackness), which cannot be decided by a reading of Fanon's texts, reveals what I will call an aporia within the opposition in which both optimism and pessimism become in some important sense less, rather than more, decidable as opposed terms.

The passages above confirm this point about how an optimistic reading risks becoming pessimistic in face of the evidence of black pathology, and how a pessimistic reading thereby constitutes an optimistic affirmation of that pathology. There is nothing here that requires us to settle one in favor of the other, and nothing, I suggest, that allows us to be certain that optimism does not affirm its own disavowal, or that pessimism does not disavow its own affirmation. Hence we should not doubt that fidelity to the one becomes *at once and in a similar way* the true interpretation of

the other. This is, firstly, because both of the above passages pertain directly, without mediation, to the issue of what it means to free oneself from that which shames you when what shames you is the shame of being (black), that is, when blackness is already shame and any attempt to escape it is already a particular instance of black pathology. What adds some pathos to these particular passages is the agonism that defines both the desire to escape and the resignation that understands escape as the active affirmation of that from which one necessarily flees, but only towards oneself. How can one escape the pathological concept of blackness, to use Moten's terms, if blackness *is* nothing other than pathology? Sexton's essay, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," first published in 2011, was written as a direct response to Moten's essay, "The Case of Blackness," first published in 2008. The essential difficulty of both texts derives from the authority of their convictions and, therefore, in a certain manner, their politics. Both essays turn on the question of what it means to make black history into a transcendent, onto-political event without escaping it, while knowing that blackness is the thing that always escapes, or is fugitive to its historical representation but in a positive rather than a nihilistic sense. For reasons that we shall soon see, both essays chiefly consist in a reading of what for Fanon is a particular instance of black pathology, the fact that the black is a stranger to himself, and what makes the essential difference between this fact and lived experience, is the misrecognitions by which the black necessarily identifies his estrangement. At any rate, to understand this para-ontological difference (Moten) we will need to understand why for Fanon there is a sharp distinction between history and time.

As regards the question of identification and liberation Fanon is absolutely unambiguous:

> Here is my life caught in the noose of existence. Here is my freedom, which sends me back to my own reflection. No, I have not the right to be black.

And:

> The density of History determines none of my acts.
>
> I am my own foundation.
>
> And it is by going beyond the historical and instrumental given that I initiate my cycle of freedom.[14]

As one comes upon them in "By Way of a Conclusion," such statements are so surprising, go so much against what Fanon is expected to say, that sometimes it is difficult to grasp what he is indeed saying. An example of this is

the two passages above. If, on the one hand, Sexton sees acceptance where Fanon presents repeated refusal, of a willingness (to be black) where Fanon asserts that he has no *right* to be black (for acceptance and affirmation are merely symptomatic inversions of refusal and negation); and, on the other, Moten sees a nihilist response to the pathological that can never quite escape its concept, whereas Fanon, in line with what we have hitherto explained, asserts that any (theoretical) desire to escape the contingent or indeterminate relation between black experience and liberation is itself caught in the *noose* of pathology, and one that bears witness to a passive (instrumental-historicist) attitude to liberation, that is because, ultimately, Fanon's thinking, per its reading of temporality and contingency, is often *too* easy to follow or comprehend. Or, since the simplicity of the text is never *simple*, any reading that forgets this, per definition, fails.

The question then becomes why the question of black freedom is pursued vis-à-vis time: Fanon suggests that a racial-oriented freedom is a compromised freedom, for the more one looks towards the direction of a black past, the more one risks losing the future glimpsed to reification. This is why he rejects what he calls the slavish attitude toward the past of native bourgeois intellectuals, their motive being to enhance their own "psycho-existential" security rather than to become a platform for resistance (Moten) or active affirmation (Sexton). These nativists evidently believed that tradition gave them a sense of identity and belonging that made them feel majestic and dignified and so allowed them to readily submit to being ruled over in the present. Thus, the fact that such a tradition does not exist, or never did exist, and so in practice lies beyond any faithful restoration, persuaded Fanon that such derivation was in fact imaginary, or substituted what was in fact a pathological need for historico-political possibility. Indeed, as Fanon's response indicates, this attitude, in its very claim to be a vision of cultural fidelity, immediately becomes trapped in a vicious circle: the more one "exalts the past at the expense of my present and of my future," the more distant the life lived in the present becomes and the more closed the future (as nothing but a repetition of that illustrious past, a future perfect).[15] The appeal of a past that has never been present is, for Fanon, one of the more familiar, if corrupt, appeals of cultural nationalism. In "By Way of a Conclusion," he continues by objecting to the very idea that he has a right to blackness, as if a right could secure the identification so eagerly sought, rather than confirm the fundamental passivity of this attitude toward the antagonisms of the present, whose wretchedness

still deserves honor and respect, rather than erasure. Any view of the past that treats it as transcendent is here dismissed as unworthy of the present political task of transformation. In the same way, what constitutes the appeal to historic precedence in Fanon's analysis is that such an appeal makes everything seem already past, and the subject a prisoner of that past (to take up an expression from his conclusion). Consider what Fanon says about the sugar plantation worker, or a member of the Vietminh: "they are not hoping that their sacrifice will bring about the reappearance of a past. It is for the sake of the present and of the future that they are willing to die."[16] For the victim of racial-capital exploitation, historical knowledge is an irrelevance, for the notion of a glorified pre-imperial past cannot convert the wretchedness of being excluded from the world into an act that would transform it. What the radical attitude to the past changes, more profoundly, is not its transcendence but how it is conceived as the expression of an alienated interiority, with regard to which Fanon sees an incertitude that is both idealistic and passive.

Although I shall not here attempt to follow Fanon's discussion of black cultural nationalism (negritude) through his writing, it is clear that the passage I have quoted is not (for good reasons) his last word: from the discussions of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in *Black Skin, White Masks*, to the discussion of René Depestre and Keita Fodeba in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon has in fact been writing about the future of black critical thought, without making any concessions to the overall metaphysics of negritude. So although he rejects any notion of the past as transcendent, and even more as an exercise in progressivist teleology, Fanon's critique of negritude as a discourse of time is not historical in any simple or strict way. If in a fundamental way negritude appears here, in Fanon's text, as a nihilism, one of the key ways it does so is in its imitation and reproduction of the concept of race as the ground of human being, in the same way as the white discourse of modernity.

Here Fanon makes a pointed reference to an essay by Günther Anders, "The Pathology of Freedom," in which the contemporary problem of nihilism is related to problems of time and of historical experience.[17] Nihilism, says Anders, is a desire to possess and "render the world congruent with oneself," a thirst for power that is traced back to the disappointment at having to share one's existence with other beings—a point that also concerns Fanon, who cites it in his analysis of the colonial desire for power, for representation, to have the *all* that one is not.[18] If colonialism is not,

strictly speaking, a nihilism (given what Anders calls a desire to escape the pain of contingency), it nonetheless can be taken to illustrate what Anders calls a *refuge* from the *threat* of the contingent.[19]

Fanon states this clearly enough, and adds in various asides that experience is not only a perpetual repetition, or suspense, between immiseration and usurpation, at least in so far as the future is always already contained in the past, for the subject has to learn that he has his *own* past, a past in whose relation to the self Fanon deduces a universal human *duty*, a necessity to act, and to take responsibility for, a transformation of self and world. And so he concludes *Black Skin, White Masks* with an appeal to the one who introduces invention into existence, who is ceaselessly open to this task that relates him to the world, a task that is neither predictable nor foreseeable, still less experienced (as memory), and which within the self becomes something non-contingent or, as Anders has it, even if the world appears contingent to the one who wants to transform it, "it is beyond all contingency that it is *him* who has the will to transform it."[20] This type of attitude is, along with a new sense of social worldliness (*soziale Weltlichkeit*), a persistent theme of what Fanon describes (and we will see more examples of this in Part Two) as a leap that is neither conserving nor pathological in nature and in which, like the Kierkegaardian tightrope walker whom he resembles, the black is thus able to cross, without ever arriving on the other side, the abyss between nothingness and infinity. The thought that traverses this abyss is worldly in a specific sense: it contests the nihilism that incessantly throws blackness into nothingness and contests the infinite promise of a universal humanism (which blackness cannot fail to reach without renouncing itself). Those who identify humanistically and those who identify nihilistically may both suffer strangeness to the world, but only the one who leaps can take charge of his identification without consecrating the compensations of either. This is why the Fanonian situation, described by Sexton as an affirmation made in the full awareness of despair, is less an example of *amor fati* than one of endless transvaluation, at least in so far as Fanon can say that in the world through which he travels "I am endlessly creating myself."[21]

II. ACTION AND REACTION (NIETZSCHE)

These explicit references to affirmation, and specifically to Nietzsche, are critical for our understanding of Fanon's "By Way of a Conclusion." And, although I do not wholly agree with Sexton that such affirmation is nec-

essarily pathological, what he invokes here as the *cost* of being black is clearly important, and relates to Fanon's second manoeuver: namely, what it means to consent to what is demanded of me when what is demanded offers me the status and name of *nègre*. Whence the following reference to Nietzsche, at the end of the chapter on "The Negro and Recognition," where Fanon writes:

> Man's behavior is not only reactional. And there is always *ressentiment* in a *reaction*. Nietzsche had already pointed that out in *The Will to Power*.
>
> To educate man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act.[22]

With these few dense sentences Fanon tries to convince us that it is man's fundamental responsibility to educate—in his concluding remarks to *Black Skin, White Masks*, he repeatedly uses the word "duty"—not only on the side of a reaction, but on the side of an action whose task is worldly transformation. The reference to Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, which condenses many of the problems discussed above, is also part of a complex thinking of black *ressentiment* that is also in some sense crucial for Fanon's thought, and for reasons that I will try to explain.

Just as there is throughout Fanon's clinical work a major concern with the border between the somatic and the psychical, so, homologically, a major concern is the point at which the active becomes passive and vice versa: there is a direct Nietzschean reference here, as can be seen in the language used, that can also be seen in the following excerpt from *The Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche writes: "The whole inner world, originally stretched thinly as though between two layers of skin, was expanded and extended itself and gained breadth, depth and height in proportion to the degree that the external discharge of man's instincts was obstructed."[23] Against this feeling of expanse, according to which every experience is an economy of force that is either passive or active, Fanon will stress that lived experience for the *colonisé* is not so outward-driven. The inner life of the colonized, as we saw earlier, is one in which preservation involves the exclusion of anything that threatens the imaginary compensations of whiteness, be it on the side of negation or on the side of disavowal, an exclusion most clearly in evidence in lactification, but one that in fact defines blackness as either the *absence* of color (a nothing) or as a specular *intrusion* (an excess). However, rather than discharge conflict outwards, the *colonisé* reinteriorizes it as the sign of its social inferiority, creating feelings of shame

and guilt. And so Fanon presents *le vécu noir* as a capacity to be affected that is ceaselessly open to the forces that destructure it, and that modify it, a capacity that is neither active nor passive, but the reactive affect of negrophobic encounters. In Fanon's reading of Jaspers, Ey, and Merleau Ponty, this inner insufficiency can thus only be known through what inhibits or obstructs it rather than through its movement or consecration; similarly, there can be no passivity without activity not because their relation is chiasmic, still less because they lack strength or intensity, but because black lived experience is the trace of an interrupted movement without surcease. It is therefore legitimate to point out that even in the subject educated to be actional there is always a relation to passivity that never ceases to accompany its decision to be itself, holding up to it the mirror of its own insufficiency—does not the *ressentiment* in each reaction mean, particularly for the one who acts, that any decision to be sovereign (or to be actively black in Sexton's terms) is already compromised by the slavish need to will this future appearance of itself as sovereign? If willing is the attitude that transforms what it means to live in an anti-black world, does not the language of *choosing oneself* as black not reproduce the very conditions of black abjection? And clearly if "the first action of the black man is a *reaction,*" how are we to understand this act that begins by inhibiting itself?[24]

Finally, willing change has to do with the question of why one acts; even if, as I have suggested, the desire to act is in principle formed by an unconscious consent to be acted upon (whose necessity already goes beyond the intellectual impasses of liberation), then how does one distinguish the desire to be black from its *ressentiment*? This also means that the role of will is not an *identity* to which activity and passivity are then attached as vehicles of expression. Fanon conceives of their relation in a more dialectical sense, as we have just explained it, as can be seen in the following citations from Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, experience is always a process of passive self-preservation and conquest (compare Fanon: "it is always a question of annihilation or triumph"[25]): "What do active and passive mean? Is it not becoming master and being defeated? And subject and object?"[26] And: "What is 'passive'? Resisting and reacting. Being hindered in one's forward-reacting movement: then an act of resistance and reaction. . . . What is 'active'? Reaching out for power."[27] Although such sentences are often read—like Fanon's above—as descriptions of two separate processes, what matters is the narrative that links them, for neither activity nor passivity is active or passive in itself; it is only in relation that they take on meaning

and so produce themselves. For not only are they simultaneously object and subject to one another, they are also what resists and so hinders the other. In that sense activity and passivity are merely the derived form of a mediation that precedes them. I want to put a particular emphasis on this point because it is through these opposing drives that the very notion of an inside and outside, or subject and object, comes into being. A passive relationship to the past—to being black—cannot be absolutely affirmed without its correlation to an active willing to bring that past back to presence, and consequently situate it as a present meaning. Or again, when it comes to subject and object, it is only through the resistance of the colonized (object) that the colonizer (subject) discovers itself, but as an *I* that thereby only becomes accessible to itself as an object of resistance. Conversely, the colonized object, by virtue of its own resistance, becomes subject because this thing that it is not and with which it nevertheless has to be identified (object), makes it realize what it essentially means to be a stranger to oneself (subject and object). In fact, the problem is not to resolve these limit situations as resistant or passive, or to introspect them and their effects, it is to describe the cultural code (negrophobia) by which object and subject are signified throughout the process of their worldly encounter.

Thus, each time Fanon refers to black skin as represented and reports details of an *écart* or dehiscence in the experiencing, which he knows perfectly well is also the very possibility of black becoming, there occurs, by way of complex metaphor, a sense that another layer of skin has been superimposed or joined that allows black skin to be racially represented. At times, Fanon describes that imposition as an external foreign body that usurps or divides an already divided corporeal schema, and at others as an envelope that is essentially permeable, leaking outwardly what it has preserved and defended as a white inner surface that is hemorrhaging from the inside outwards and permanently altering the skin's black appearance. Likewise, what distinguishes the black corporeal schema is this chiasmus between an outer barrier that has been imposed and an inner layer that has been made permeable by internal hemorrhaging. There are other things that one can say here, but I will omit them so as to get on to the third topic I want to deal with. I will just note that the black bodily schema is the sign of an interrupted chiasma, for there would be no sense in giving blackness immediacy outside of its cultural cognition/perception. *Black skin skins itself*, so to speak: nothing is immediate or locatable as black; there is a gap or a flaw (barely perceptible) within the individual, which

allows the drives to be redirected to that externality (imago) within the self, which is close to what Nietzsche refers to as the gap between two skins, allowing for a passive conquest that is actively grasped as externally imposed and thereby allowing for an imaginary aggression against oneself, which is the main theme of *Black Skin, White Masks*. That aggression comes simultaneously from within and without, which means that this skin is formed by what invades it, but also deformed by the effort to preserve this foreignness as a protection from exposure to its own occurrence. The social death that supervenes on the psyche is to this extent simultaneously a drive to make the ego the contact point for the projection that ruins it, or a state in which being fatally open to exposure is the locus of an already seeping poison coming from within. Fanon uses the phrase "sacrificial dedication" to describe this reversible, autoimmune self-relation, in several striking formulations.

There is, for example, the persistent image of the black as impotently slavish because he was formerly a slave (and one that once again has disconcerting implications for Fanon's understanding of freedom and liberation): "The former slave, who can find in his memory no trace of the struggle for liberty or of that anguish of liberty of which Kierkegaard speaks, sits unmoved before the young white man singing and dancing on the tightrope of existence."[28] On a tightrope between nothingness and infinity (these horizons that keep withdrawing from his grasp, that do not move him or stir him to act): for Fanon, the former slave therefore acts in a way that disavows, but never escapes, the suffering that is born from its own insufficiency: the *ressentiment* that guarantees and reinforces it, the impotent pretense (before whiteness) through which liberty is denied a world. Or, better put: this impassivity only confirms what is here an extreme indifference to liberation, that is impossible to quantify as either active or passive, and about which it is impossible to know whether it is attached to or repulsed by the enslavement that only it preserves. This holds that the truth (or desire) of blackness emanates not from absolutes (or objects of satisfaction) but along horizons that offer neither redemption nor salvation, in the sense that the more one discovers oneself to be unfree, or non-self-determined, the less one feels the need to act, or to experience the anguish of what could endow one with liberty. These horizons or abysses are given names—*ressentiment*, reaction—in which there is an exchange between presence and absence, between the concept and knowledge of *le vécu noir* and the equivalent forms of its "truth": the horizon (before which

the former slave sits unmoved) is then simply the expression of a disaffection, and one through which the moral-political subject absents itself. That is why Fanon calls *la "chose" colonisée* a reaction, because of its refusal of anything that falls under the rule of liberty, including what it itself is: because it falls under the curse of a disaffection, it does not even know its non-existence and does not even try to escape its slavishness, for it has no concern to do so.

III. FANON—AN AFRO-PESSIMIST?

If blackness cannot know itself as black without the risk of annihilating itself, how are we to construe it? One possible answer is that of racial guilt. After some dense epigrammatic comments on time, history, responsibility, praxis, and freedom, which give some further precision to the question of bare black life, Fanon's third argument, on guilt, develops some of these questions further. His point about guilt, which we already noted in Chapter Six ("Desire and Law"), is straightforward and trenchant: namely that to freely determine oneself as black is not simply to disavow how blackness was originally, slavishly, imposed, but it is to know how one has been obligated—existentially, politically, ontologically—by that imposition. Even if the black chooses what Fanon describes as invention, it cannot be presumed that such a decision will be definitive of a new internal psychic freedom. *In precisely the same way*, it is not necessary to be black to be knowingly or actively so. Hence the reason for Fanon's rather startling claim that blackness is not a right upon which one can lay claim to existence. There is no way that one can liberate oneself from the intolerable social costs of blackness if one remains bound to it as a compact, or as something to which one remains illusorily attached; rather than seeing it as a right (and therefore predetermined in the sense of a contract), to be free to decide whether to retain that right or give it up and transfer it to some other humanism is not to reinvent it in Fanon's sense, but rather to remain transcendentally obligated to it. The substitution of right for enslavement is *still* slavish in so far as the freedom proposed keeps one formally bound, and thus *not* substantially free. This is why some of the best black readers of Fanon are very poor judges of the blackness of his thought. From the Fanonian perspective of misrecognition, any position that fails to see the reciprocal implication of imposition and misrecognition is already delusory. Accordingly, what Fanon calls the great Negro myth, or the "*Fraud* [*Ruse*] of a black world," is quite naturally viewed with some suspicion.[29] Here too the critics seem,

with some unanimity, unable to see the implications of this suspicion. It is not so much that they do not want to see it, but rather that they do not know what to do with a claim that condemns blackness, or at least the illusory confirmation of a black world. This condemnation does not of course claim that blackness has no chance of a world, or indeed that it is not *the very possibility* of the world. But if one believes that this world only exists as a possibility (a thought forever enclosed by anti-blackness), then any claim to know it must be fraudulent. This is also why the suggestion that Fanon condemns blackness to a pessimistic *explanation* on the grounds that he is unable to see or imagine the lived reality of black *experience* (Moten) (and therefore can only affirm its inter-diction) itself misrecognizes what, for Fanon, is the more urgent question: whether resistance (in keeping with the modernist tradition from which we inherit it) is not entirely consistent with a slavish interpretation of black existence?

Without hesitation, it can be said that blackness is not consistent with the notion of conscious consent, and not merely because the latter fails to broach the entire question of the unconscious by which blackness submits to the law of its own abjection. What must be said in any case is that if blackness must escape all the methods of analysis, explanation, reading, or interpretation that have produced it as a *racial* revelation, it must also escape all those logics that want to make it recognizable and consistent as a *post-racial* evasion (humanism, the discourses and politics of liberation, recognition, sacrifice, eschatology, and so on). This undertaking (of reinvention) cannot be thought of merely as a way out, or even as a "fugitive movement" *more internal* to the meaning of a black liberated life restored to a more faithful, optimistic translation, which Moten argues is "necessarily unaccounted for in Fanon" and precisely because of the "inadequacy" of black existence to being in general.[30] To reinvent blackness in terms of its fragility—and consequently grasp its constitutive "homelessness" in the world—is certainly part of what needs to be done, but what Fanon means by invention has implications well beyond Moten's explicit concerns in "The Case of Blackness," and indeed well beyond the purview of blackness itself considered as a life stolen from the world.[31] So what, then, is being unaccounted for? The claim here runs as follows: any undertaking to reinvent black existence, including and especially the language of impurity or flaw, has to conceive it as a weakness, giving it a movement that has to be always "retrospectively and retroactively *located*," but that never reaches being as such.[32] This errancy of movement is neither what blackness *is*, nor what it is pathologically con-

strued to be, but it is what appears as the history of black social life, or what Moten calls the fugitive logic of that life. As such, in so far as Fanon disavows that logic, he cannot think black social life.

Moten says this in the clearest of terms, but what nonetheless remains unclear to me is why this inadequacy should *represent* Fanon's disavowal of black social life, which is taken to stand for an ambivalent relation to "the supposedly pathological" (Moten reads the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* as a sign of that ambivalence).[33] Taking those case histories as his example, Moten argues that they do indeed show a duty to resist (abjection) that makes duty as such impossible: "But this duty, imposed by an erstwhile subject who clearly is supposed to know, overlooks (or, perhaps more precisely, looks away from) that vast range of nonreactive disruptions of rule that are, in early and late Fanon, both indexed and disqualified."[34]

If Fanon were indeed merely to turn away from the kinds of disruption that Moten describes, how could he also assume what Moten calls a "preconscious duty to resist," which needs to be pointed out and even denounced because it "sabotages" the very development of the revolutionary political consciousness it prescribes?[35] A duty to resist, which does not pertain strictly to what Fanon says (he refers to a duty "to have the slightest effort literally dragged out of him [the *colonisé*]"), can, it seems, only affirm the conscious decision to *become* political as a pathological one, what Moten calls "the assertion of a kind of political criminality" as against the "crime" of complicity.[36] Why is decolonial resistance intrinsically a duty, when there always remains the possibility of its pathological "non-arrival"?[37] And why assume that Fanon has to turn away from that which consists essentially—for him—in an experience that must be either complicit or criminal? This is where I have some trouble with Moten's reading, because the word "duty" is neither volitional nor voluntarist in the concluding chapters of either *Black Skin, White Masks* or *The Wretched of the Earth*; duty is not to be understood in a moral-juridical, nor existential sense, but refers to how the *colonisés* are compelled to act in ways that are specifically unknown to them, with respect to which these subjects are profoundly unaware—but unaware in ways that might always *seem* actively chosen, and whose effect, as such, is never simply chosen, and never simply reactive or pathological. In the first place, neither the *colon* nor the *colonisé* can avoid complicity with the political-unconscious atmosphere that animates every aspect of life in the colony. As long as they comply, the doors of existence will be open to them, but every private entrance will be closed

to the real. Further, if the subject takes refuge in an imaginary solitude, to the exclusion of the bonds necessary for their condemnation as black, as long as they remain suspended, each day more intimately whiter, there really is no way out from this duty to resist the world whose darkness everywhere descends. That decolonial war put an end to these mirages became all the more important to Fanon's clinical research. It became possible, in brief, to link this complicity to a profoundly racist truth to which these subjects remained bound. In order that the treatment of such subjects could be effected without any suspicion of fraud or moral condemnation, no agreement was made with these patients as to what their duty was, and certainly not before they had experienced the work of exposing their desire to the clinical group as a metonym of the socius. According to Fanon's *socialthérapie*, the cultural dimension of the symptom was always present, but it is how that presence gets lodged in the skin of the symptom, so to speak, that was decisive for how the patient encountered the languages and structures of the clinic. Psychic reinvention, as Fanon conceives it, is certainly not to be imposed, since it consists in the rigorous separation, and acting out of the separation, of what shatters from what conserves, of the therapeutic from the language of liberation, which it neither resembles, nor depends on, nor fundamentally has anything to do with. Believing that Fanon somehow, unaccountably, conflated the two, or subjected the therapeutic to the political, is to present the latter as the non-pathological truth of the former, which is precisely opposite to the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

As Fanon puts it: "Here is my life caught in the noose of existence. Here is my freedom, which sends me back to my own reflection. . . . And it is by going beyond the historical and instrumental given that I initiate my cycle of freedom." This noose in which black existence appears to be captured is not merely a constriction, but more importantly, nor can it be fled from or escaped. It is only by means of being seized by such a stricture—at the point where one is about to fall into nothingness—that the condition for achieving that higher, more complex form of freedom opens one's reflection to a new kind of vertigo. Noosely invoked here as the figure for what surrounds black internal life, what could it possibly mean to see in the image of a lynching the image of a fall reversed from that of expiation to that of freedom? Is it precisely here that a more optimistic reading might be glimpsed in Fanon's pessimism? In a way, the entire debate between Moten and Sexton concerning the meaning of the word *black-*

ness is summarized here in this figure of "escape" that, in some way, can never be escaped, and that makes it difficult to tell whether it is an execution desired or a freedom attained through self-murder. This would also mean, clinically speaking, that the point of group analysis is not to offer respite from feelings of dissociation but to reveal to the subject the obstacles to awareness by which they remain bound to negrophobia. Or rather, it is the way in which the symptom is knotted to existence that must be held onto in clinical practice, rather than prematurely severed or brought to an end. I think that it is impossible to understand Fanon's language here without taking into account this characterization of black expiation. Yet this fall, in its tautness, is indisputably part of the historical idiom of blackness, on the grounds that this noose is not merely an *image* of black being, but part of a history in whose determination blackness can only envisage itself as a fatal freedom, a lynching that never ceases to be the *telos* of its world. And in the sense that blackness never stops being lynched in its image, or lynched as image, as Fanon says, this is why its vertiginous movement is always a drop toward the void. Anticipating here a key political insight of afro-pessimism, Fanon sees in the noose the privileged sign of what it means to be black in the world, whose *reaction*—understood in the Nietzschean sense—marks a strange fruit as devoid of life as a stone. In the wake of such images, who would not feel the weight of a constriction of, on Fanon's reading, the possibility of any black identity or positivity whatsoever? Without realizing it, then, Moten's definition of what he believes can be circumscribed as "the viciously constrained movement" of Fanon's thought (between duty and resistance) brings us closer to the pessimistic foundations of what any black liberation could conceivably be.[38]

There are some afro-pessimistic readings of Fanon, by Sexton, Wilderson, et al., and possibly my own, that see Fanon not as a disavower of freedom, but as an avower of how blackness is itself always freely disavowed as the price of its entry into the world. They are not purely, as Moten says of Fanon, refusers of black social life, but they are readers of Fanonism as the expression of why blackness is unlivable in an anti-black world. Today, I think that it is important to say that they are beyond optimism because they are also beyond black nihilism. This, unquestionably, is why our purpose here is not to read optimism pessimistically, nor to make pessimism the rebuke of optimism, but to read and reread the ways by which one reproduces the logic of the other at precisely those moments when either a pessimistic or optimistic reading of black social life is insufficient. To that

extent, as Sexton says, "the affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality."[39] What such sentences reveal—and here Sexton and Moten coincide—is the way that affirmation in Fanon is invariably read as a pathological affirmation. Moten is very explicit about this; he calls it "Fanon's pathological insistence on the pathological," whereas Sexton says that Fanon "fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological." Why they say this is somewhat obscure. If, for example, Fanon says that the black child abnormalizes itself before any actual racist encounter, the verb entails an incorporation that consumes itself as it were, for the child has *already kept its promise* to the world by canceling out its future as a *black* subject. Otherwise, what is its chance in a negrophobic world? Blackness is, then, not so much an affirmation as the forced exercise of its own denegation, and this is why it can only confirm itself as what it is not, and disarticulate itself as a ruined work. This is why it is not the promise that is pathological, but its injurious affirmation. A point that then gets read by Moten, notwithstanding Fanon's stress on misrecognition, as if Fanon essentially was proposing that *no one in their right minds would choose to be nègre*, which again is not wrong, but misses the philosophically interesting point—for what is at stake here is the question of freedom, or what it could possibly mean to freely choose to be black when the decision necessarily means to embrace the world that condemns you. And to choose it knowing, but without being able to foresee, that such a decision will result in a pathological feeling of vertigo. I think that it is this more difficult and demanding situation that Sexton derives from Fanon in his talk of an affirmation that is chosen *despite* it being literally at the end of a rope. No wonder then that Sexton, in his response to this reading, feels moved to point out that it is not the black who chooses to be pathological, but the world that makes the choice self-annihilating.

Moten presents his reading of Fanon as one in which optimism "is tied to the commerce between the lived experience of the black and the fact of blackness."[40] To the extent to which that life "escapes enframing" by those theories wholly given over to comprehending it, blackness is fugitive, and that is why Moten regards that fugitivity as essentially linked to a state of dispute and contestation (this is what Moten, via Heidegger, calls the *Sache*, or case, of blackness).[41] But if blackness always *escapes* from its presupposition, this presumably does not mean that it ever escapes the logic

of this "commerce" between what is grasped (as fact) and what is only ever grasped as ungraspable. It is for the same reason, too, namely the incertitude of knowing, that Sexton opens his account of afro-pessimism with the following question: "What is the nature of a form of being that presents a problem for the thought of being itself? More precisely, what is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of human being at all?"[42] Since such a being can only be a problem "for any thought about being whatsoever," thus assuming and confirming that blackness is ungraspable at the level of ontology, Sexton's language is not one of revelation, but one of a radical (a word that Moten also uses) attempt to think what it means to live black life when to live that life is to live your own death in a sense, thereby confirming the social death that is the social life of blackness: what would it mean to affirm that life, that death, as the true meaning of blackness?

Between these two readings of Fanon may be perceived two differing attitudes to the ways in which blackness is revealed and reveals itself to the world. But they also reveal, due to the fact that blackness can never ever be the thing that it is presumed to be, that blackness must remain fugitive even to the concept of fugitivity if it is to be grasped (as "black") and, conversely, that any thought worthy of the name "black" must free itself from its continual misapprehension. Likewise, the true interpretation of what blackness is cannot be decided by any appeal to problems of method or of concept, for its being is nowhere: *n'est pas*. This distinction is a rigorous one, and leads to a decidedly Fanonian form of questioning. And yet both readings also want to reveal what blackness is as a fact of being, which sits uneasily with the idea that blackness remains necessarily unknown to any thought whatsoever, and precisely because it remains unthought outside the forces that shatter it. This disquiet follows from the need to make blackness reflect a demand that is either optimistic or pessimistic, an evocation that produces a slippage that leaves black thought intact. This is why I think that Fanonism remains obscure to both readings—and the complicities that link them undefined. Sexton says very clearly that afro-pessimism "posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of Human in a constitutive way"; this divide does not necessarily refer to any lived experience, but nor does the argument rely on any kind of historical context in its reference to racial slavery.[43] Perhaps this is why afro-pessimism "has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black

performance, or even a denial of black social life."[44] The response to such an accusation is unambiguous: "Blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism," Sexton writes, "the world is."[45] From this it is evident that the theory has been confused for that of the anti-black world where, undoubtedly, the true politics of afro-pessimism lies. That accusation is restated by Moten with considerable rhetorical force, and yet when speaking of the "refusal of blackness" it is Fanon who is repeatedly accused (and thereby refused), so much so that the word "disavowal" itself comes to take on a disavowed structure, by means of which it is clear that the text itself becomes an example of what it exemplifies.[46] The text about the disavowal of blackness is itself a black disavowal, and the refusal of blackness that it mentions inhabits its own structure as a refusal of Fanon's black thought. That thought is unthinkably black, it is unthinkable because it refuses the logic by which fugitivity is *known*, and it is intensely black, for what it names as *n'est pas* cannot even be rendered, in a sense, as fugitive at all. This is why I necessarily believe that Fanonism begins at the point where both optimism and pessimism become *impossible*, as I hope to show in what follows.

Here the differences between the two readings take on some importance. But as I will go on to show, those differences cannot finally be maintained, for what can be analyzed as optimism can only be affirmed by its pessimistic reading. Likewise, it becomes impossible to maintain a pessimistic opposition to optimism, for then the optimistic opposition between pathogen and the world would be undone. And yet if it becomes impossible to maintain the opposition between pessimism and optimism, then it necessarily follows that this impasse should lead to the abandonment of any optimistic or pessimistic concept of Fanonism itself, in favor of a more generalizable structure. And more generally, just as Fanon's thinking about disavowal re-describes optimism as invention, so he compels us to rethink the pessimistic truths of anti-blackness and the politics by which it is traditionally held and rendered. Of the differences between the situation of the afro-pessimist and that of the afro-optimist, the first that comes to mind is that both have some relation to what Fanon calls the *mort à bout touchant* or death-in-life, the symbolic death that is not purely within the realm of language and whose meaning is neither present nor simply historical. Sexton, writing very much with the afterlife of slavery in mind, and who presents his text as an "interrogation of power in its most intimate dimension," goes on to imagine what kind of politics is possible in wake of this historical "theft that creates the crime and

its alibi at once."[47] For Moten, what is most radical about blackness is the exchange between experience and fact, whose instability is located in the thought of its existence.[48] There are phenomenological assumptions here, and Moten has a long passage that refers to Heidegger[49]: both writers strongly deny that black lived experience is reducible to the way in which its political meaning has been historically produced or understood. The problem is that, whereas Moten and Sexton grapple with that history as never quite past, and so as having a kind of uncanny validity, Fanon's interest is in how blackness comes to be articulated as a kind of guilty liason whose meaning is always there before me, like a noose, or stricture, that I receive as a language and as a law, and one that is therefore *constraining*. He implies that this commandment is not opposed to the present, and at no point simply happens as the present, but nor is it a priori transcendent to black existence, in so far as the latter is thereby known historically. The way in which blackness comes to be identified as a political aesthetic, in the modern epoch, also comes to equate it, almost by definition, with the memory and identification of a particular historical suffering. For this reason, blackness exceeds not only the doctrines and decrees of this genealogy, but also the piety by which traditional historical conceptions continue to conceive of that modernity. But the equating of blackness with historical knowledge centered on the present no matter how uncanny—which Moten and Sexton both do—is put into question by Fanon. In Fanon's own discourse, blackness is always the trace of a desire that is *nachträglich*, and so is variously present even to the meaning-effects of its own uncanniness. For this reason this state could be called belated, since it is not even bound to the articulations that would seek to blacken it by representing it, and this belatedness affects even the way in which Fanon thinks about blackness as a thing or object. Indeed, his concluding remarks are first and foremost a reflection on why blackness cannot resolve itself as phenomenological knowledge, or as a being discovering itself in the world amidst other objects. And this is why it ceases, the moment that it has done its historical work as either criminal or belated. This is the first point of difference.

Now let us pass to the second, running through both texts, to see what it teaches about the social life of blackness. The first thing that strikes us about Moten's text is the story it narrates about the "appositional encounter" between black life and politics, which seems to mean that black social life represents the possibility of (rather than the discrepancy between) escape

and invention, that is, a "politics of impure or impurifying facticity."[50] Even though there is the suggestion that this impurity can be purely formal, and in ways that are independent of sense and meaning, black lived experience is necessarily brought back to "the possibilities embedded in a social life."[51] Similarly, Sexton sees afro-pessimism's intervention and interlocution in how blackness can be "rendered available to thought or even become knowledge."[52] Both thereby assume that blackness has an impurity that can be rendered, and so included, in a representational politics. But as we have already shown, this is not Fanon's emphasis; Fanon, in his sharp distinction between that which eludes and that which is the inconceivable residue of knowledge, presents a blackness that is always driven to reproduce itself belatedly, like a slave, in the racial representations of culture, and one that is *n'est pas*, whose crime—and consequently transgression—is to elude both consciousness and knowledge. Hence, the refusal of any experience that agrees fully with racial common sense, and thus the rejection of any belief that *righting* the "wrong" of blackness could be secured by making blackness a right (to representation) in the present. I will come back to the question of experience below, but I wanted to raise the question of representation here in terms of a discrepancy that may be mutually exclusive. What I mean is that Moten's view of black life reveals a fundamental discrepancy between a celebratory and a nihilistic view of black experience; this is what we showed above—that the aesthetics and form of black art do not depend on knowing what a work means but also concern the way in which the work expresses meaning and value. Fanon describes this as a situation that requires black art to offer consolation for a loss that was never lost as such, but is always endlessly graspable as a separation in the present. The racial metaphysics of negritude always render blackness as in some sense present, but always lost as presence, or only apparently present. That is the nihilism of the optimist, that blackness has to represent something for it to be present, that it has to convey a power that necessarily precedes the social death of its advent, otherwise it will remain haunted by impotence and ruination.

The relationship of the pessimist to Fanon's original texts is even more fraught because of this, which I believe comes down to a demand that blackness be a death that endures beyond sacrifice or tragedy. I see in this demand a relationship between allegory and irony, wherein the problem of knowledge or the desire for understanding, or the need to make a coherent statement, is entirely postponed, or at least rendered aberrant in

the very attempt at reading. It follows that the most pessimistic reading, and the most optimistic, must both engage with the elusiveness of Fanon's texts without confusing pessimistic uncertainty with the optimistic deceptions of knowledge. In this context, Sexton asks the following question: "Can there be a knowledge of a grammar (of suffering), of a structure (of vulnerability)? If so, is it available to articulation, can it be said, or is it an unbearable, unspeakable knowledge?"[53] I cannot be absolutely sure that knowledge is the right word here, rather than non-knowledge, which has its own set of connotations (*incompletion*, *insufficiency*) that do not agree with the stress on knowledge. Moten's various emphases on blackness as a kind of fleeting irruption are closer here to Fanon's language, because on this basis the figure that comes to the fore is that of a disorder, or disruption, best understood in terms of the difficult relationship between the hermeneutics and poetics of invention. Invention is a relation of discourse to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated. It will be better therefore to adduce this disorder not according to a case law brought before an assembly (*Sachen*), but in terms of the instability immanent to the meaning of blackness itself, where the case is understood etymologically in the sense of contingency and of fall (*lapsus*), that is to say, the shock of contingency through which the case of blackness is found, invented, without the presupposition of a judgment (of affirmation), or the need to name an example (which cannot just be an example) of pathology.

In contrast, Sexton's concern is perhaps less poetic, but more politico-philosophical. He wants to argue that blackness has an essential relation to social death even when read optimistically, and this consecution is not to be simply celebrated or simply deplored. And, more crucially, that social death is the law of blackness as law (as case), but knowing that this "law" is derived in the first instance by the kinds of social processes at work in black social life. In the case of Fanon, blackness's relation to law cannot act as an example of law's self-relation, in that blackness is not reducible to either the "simple interdiction nor bare transgression" of law: whether this be figured in terms of pathology or denigration, it is clearly a situation of a duty that proceeds without right, if only in that blackness is obligated by law to renounce itself as the very possibility of its jurisdiction.[54] This difference thereby shows the second difference.

This point is best understood in terms of what Fanon means by *mort à bout touchant*, as is evident from the text in which it appears, *Studies in*

a Dying Colonialism. In the essay on "Medicine and Colonialism," Fanon suggests that "the colonized, like all the people in underdeveloped countries and all the dispossessed everywhere, do not see life as blossoming and fruition but as a permanent struggle against *atmospheric* death": this omnipresent death, this *mort à bout touchant*, "tends to make of life an incomplete death," in which small and large acts of resistance are not so much a "refusal of life" as an all-too-human response to this "close and contagious death."[55] Thus, a *resistance* to colonialism is both instituted and marked by this incomplete life-death. By refusing Western medicine, by making Western therapy into a clandestine struggle over life *and* death, the colonized know that it is through the promise of the cure that the *law of colonialism reaffirms itself*. Thus the patient *vanishes* or releases himself from the passive objectivity of colonial pathology; and while this confirms the Western view of the colonized as feckless, for Fanon these acts are the site of the coalescence of a struggle in which life and death are openly or implicitly in conflict: i.e., by shutting himself up alone with his disease, fastened to it, coiled up in its fascination and pain, its emptiness and voluptuousness, the colonized produces social death as the symptom of an overwhelmed body, in whose dispossessed life and incomplete death the rottenness of Western pathology is revealed as a discourse of cure without ultimate justification or legitimation, a cure (or case) within which the rule of law and propriety is sustained by force and violence. There is then something rotten in this encounter between medical efficacy and the racialized body that infuses the cure with an element of violence and compulsion.

It is therefore surprising to read that this situation is one in which Fanon shows his "ongoing ambivalence toward the supposedly pathological."[56] Moten's mildly parodic sketch of this case history in which anticolonial resistance is both symptom and cure could well be read as a refusal to read what Fanon himself says about the contagion of social death in the colony. There has been a great deal of discussion, and long before the advent of afro-pessimism, of the different points of view that Fanon adopts to affirm the lived social death of the colonized. A way of connecting this death to his psychotherapeutics, or more broadly to his analysis of the colonial body, would be to consider what he says about that body's contraction and/or mortification; in other words, to see the truth of that body in its subsequent alienation, or rigidity, to make this body reveal itself as a form of resistance (not even necessarily a conscious one) to the signifieds of colonialism. The atmosphere of certain-uncertainty defining this body

affords an example: the sheer material facticity of that atmosphere is secreted in the body (both clandestinely and literally), which is subsequently blown apart, distended, and reassembled; this body becomes virtually multiple insofar as it is injured and irreal, obsessed and petrified, a body that would assume its affirmation in so far as its injury becomes an unspeakable piece of the real, simultaneously performing delirious disorder and a conserving desire as it undergoes torture, petrification, and the seeming infinitude of total war. It is therefore not easy to see why Moten should describe this multiply injured body as a dialectical reversal (of political consciousness and cure), rather than what Fanon describes as its structural vocation: that is, not to decode (the case), but to *overcode* or *overwrite* both law and criminality, resistance and complicity with the advent—whether perverse or paranoiac, imaginary or neurotic—of decolonial war. In Moten's account this structure is read as a political prescription (to resist) that is always positioned as a natural will to resistance. It is a reading that is at once maybe too psychological and too normative, all the more so in that it seems to disregard what Fanon refers to as the indescribable, or inassimilable: the shock or accentuation of the revolutionary moment that is both destructive and decomposing. So Fanonism now becomes a text whose political prescriptions are contradicted by its psychotherapeutic demands, in so far as the liberatory narrative of revolution inevitably forecloses the now normative notion of the cure. The problem with this reading is that the notion of resistance is projected as a *telos* rather than grasped as an advent that exceeds all such narratives. This is too pessimistic a reading: unless we conceive of the incomplete death that seizes—*this* life, *this* body—as the very thing that refuses to be exhausted by categories of resistance or pathology, we will fail to read, in short, what Fanon means by the permanent hemorrhaging of this black body which ultimately no art or politics can stem, precisely because in the movement of its history there are few categories that wish to touch it without being made dirty or hysterical.

Fanon further goes on to say, in his concluding remarks, that blackness is explicitly not a problem of being, but a being whose morality and politics cannot be self-determined: the anaphora "I do not have the right" is not just repeated in a grammatical sense, but is a way of putting into question any correspondence between race and right, as if one were the culmination of the other. Not content with this, Fanon repeatedly uses the phrase "I am [not]": all this is plainly consistent with a refusal of any onto-juridical understanding of the case (of blackness), and its relation-

ship to life, its meaning and concept. If blackness is in some fundamental way incompatible with the desire for social life, what, in Fanon's text, does blackness resemble? One of the things it resembles would be philosophy, in that it is critical, in the same way that philosophy is critical, of any simple notion of liberation, of any philosophical discourse that sees freedom as a regulative Idea (existentially, phenomenologically, ontologically) somehow abstracted from the situation. Philosophy is not a judge of the world as we know it, but it has another relationship to that world. Critical philosophy, and the reference would be to Anders again, will be critical in the same way that blackness is critical of any notion of reparation that could deliver it from the contingency that it itself is. This is why Fanon writes that his freedom "sends back to me my own reflection," for to be free essentially means to be a stranger (*étranger*) to oneself.[57]

Accordingly, we must not forget that sentence where Fanon refuses the ruse of a black world. The meaning of the word "ruse" (meaning ploy, subterfuge, machination) states clearly enough to whom this text is not addressed. What is being named here as a deceit, or as the disjuncture between the world and blackness, is the totalizing power of racist dissimulation and the fake resemblance of humanity to a world that has now come to convey, or represent, a murderous humanitarianism. With this Fanon indicates plainly enough why the history of blackness should not be understood as a ruse for apprehending the present, and assuredly why historical suffering should not be taken to express either an optimistic or pessimistic meaning. Fanon is writing for those to come, as against those for whom there has been or will always be a black world: he is writing for what I venture to call the future proper as against the future perfect, at least in so far as the future perfect has always already been contained in the past. Fanon calls this type of attitude that foresees the future as a necessary repetition of the past, as slavish. Against this gesture, according to which everything that will be said has already been said, Fanon will stress the future present, to what is radically open and unpredictable, less a will be or will have been, but a not yet that breaks absolutely with any teleology and can therefore only present itself as *a duty without a right*. For this world that is not yet must be willed, and not simply reasoned into being. For the act to be an advent, it must not only be absolutely violent to what came before, it has to be strictly unreadable to those who seek to make sense out of it as a revelation of knowledge (and this is also why the tabula rasa is neither a messianic nor spiritual concept, nor a symbol to be understood in analogy with law).

IV. THE *N'EST PAS*

The further argument for not retaining Fanon as either a pessimistic or optimistic thinker is as follows: he implies that, in order to loosen the noose of black existence, one must resist the constant tendency to sever it, or even to escape it; the point rather is to let the matter fall, so as to dispense with anything that would seek to preserve blackness as a symbol always tied to its strangulated meaning. Arguably one of the most difficult things to grasp is those passages where Fanon says that what makes blackness black is not to be understood by analogy with any genealogy or identity, or anything that resembles an object or force. We are to think of blackness not as the obverse of thing or representation, nor are we to understand it from the perspective of the "can" or "should," the "will be" or "I am." If we want to understand the thing that blackness is, we should understand that blackness is *not*. For Fanon, "[*le nègre*] is not [*n'est pas*]. Anymore than the white man."[58] In the same way, the relationship between this *n'est pas* and blackness is not to be understood by analogy with negation (in the manner of, say, Freud or Hegel), rather we are to understand blackness from the perspective of a non-negated negativity. To understand this *n'est pas* would be the burden of any reading of Fanon's texts, whether optimistic or pessimistic.

The *nègre* is *n'est pas*, yet this *n'est pas* is not a metaphor. No wonder that critics have had difficulty. Indeed, too many readings of Fanon want to say what this "*n'est pas*" is, to explain it away on the basis of what it resembles, or represents, to reconstitute it as a totality. It seems necessary to be able to locate blackness in terms of what negates it, or, more precisely, to be able to attach predicates to it to make it recognizable (it seems to be characteristic of these readings to assume at least the possibility that blackness can be incorporated as a thing, or else as an identity or subject whose demands can be met and its referent duly agreed on). If only Fanon would come clean as to what this "is" is, then it would be easier to decide what it is not, and so appropriate or denounce it. All these readings resemble each other in the fact that they try to negate what is always already negated. Or they reveal, through their failure to understand what this *not* is, what for Fanon is already an essential failure in the history of critical philosophy: to say what blackness is in a way that is entirely freed from racism. Moten talks about blackness as a thing, for example, to which predicates of disorder and deformation can be attached, even though he will at some point insist on its "inadequacy" to the "calculation of being

in general."[59] Or in Sexton, who refers to the inescapability of black social death, we read: "In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos."[60] I do not know precisely the reason for this word "embrace": a pathology without pathos does not escape the claim that this is what blackness is in so far as it too can be rendered as a pathological thing or presentation—and it is clearly neither simply an affirmation nor a negation of blackness to say that we would have to presuppose the sense of this apathetic blackness in order to understand notions of its transvaluation. For Sexton, this apathy comes into being "where thought breaks down, at its limit."[61] Or, "must one always think blackness to think antiblackness"?[62] What such a question leaves out (and in leaving it out is doubtless true to the anti-pathos it describes) is any notion that blackness has no locatable referent or unequivocal name, but is something that escapes all attributes, including the unity of an ontic-ontological fugitivity or again the hypostatized name of "absolute dereliction."[63]

Here again when Fanon says that the *nègre* is *n'est pas*, the scenario leaves unresolved, or unspecified, what blackness *is*, in the name of trying to get at what seems to be a less identifiable, more aporetic, hesitation or movement. To represent this hesitation as optimism or pessimism is simply to reduce its meaning to a desire rather than engage with Fanon's refusal to represent or name. Is Fanon, in this refusal of the preeminence of the question of what blackness is, in fact repeating the apathetic violence of blackness towards its "pathology"? Is this a misrecognition *before* the *méconnaisance* (of blackness) as described by Fanon? Would this question, which I cannot presume to answer here, send us back to what Sexton describes as "one of the most polemical dimensions of afro-pessimism as a project: namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* in social death," a sort of originary life-death or death-in-life: a sort of double emphasis in exactly the sense that Fanon later calls, much more laconically, but perhaps more problematically, "*mort à bout touchant*"?[64] This *n'est pas* (of blackness), to the extent that it is not a possible object of knowledge or judgment, does refer us to what, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon calls the abyss.[65] This abyss that is before any earth or world, tribunal or judgment, before the determination of "the whole possibility of and desire for a world," before even the indubitability of law or object, is obviously linked to the *n'est pas* and consequently begins, always violently, where *le vécu noir* undergoes the shock of a sudden shift or a reversal in its

phenomenal existence.[66] At the same time, however, this utterly naked declivity is not something that can be known, or rendered, or propositionally named *as such*: for the non-thing that blackness is evades being judged, and should never be confused with the predicates of racism. Indeed, one could argue, apropos of Frank Wilderson, in *Red, White, and Black*, that this "great black hole" is a priori excluded from the logos of human being, and this is why it always remains other with respect to itself.[67] The thing that blackness *is* not—and accordingly, our relation to it—is the mark of a rupture that is both exterior and *radically* intimate, an abyss that is situated at the limit of judgment, thought, and desire: a monstrance without center or end. The uncanny position of this rupture is confirmed. These notions are not rhetorical: when Fanon refers to "the unidentifiable, the unassimilable" there is an attempt to locate what is situated very specifically at the limit of the human: blackness is defined not by its exorbitance, nor by its inhibition, but by the way that it is always imaginarily misrecognized as a limit work rather than what, on the contrary, makes it so singular and disturbing as the unnameable event of an infinite postponement.

Throughout Fanon's work there are many forms of blackness as both object and thing, and they all imply a concomitant expulsion of blackness from the graph of desire. They range from what may seem to be merely fetishistic investments to what is explicitly connected to accounts of an atrophic disappearance or lytic rigidification of desire (used by, for example, subjects whose object relations cannot be found in reality, but only refound in a kind of phantasmatic real, or real fantasy). To understand this work is also to understand Fanon's radical questioning of analysis and psychotherapy. The assumption that guides this analysis is very similar to Freud's reading of *Verneinung*, but for Fanon (and in ways that recall Lacan) blackness must be understood not as a metonym of a lost object, nor as the material mark of a deprivation, but as the structure of a never-having-had. In particular, we must not confuse this structure with either loss or lack; what matters is our *relation* to its impossibility, a relation that must here be understood more grammatically than logically: in the history, texts, and legacies of anti-black racism there is always an imaginary misrecognition of an object that has no ontological resistance to its signifying predicates, and one whose libidinal reproduction only exists when caught up in language. For Fanon, critical-therapeutic activity is thus essentially an activity of reinvented judgment, respecting the case in its singularity, finding the appropriate rule always only after the event. This peculiar temporality, much

more than any periodizing hypothesis, is what constitutes the lived life of blackness (which is anything but escape or theft).

This still involves a certain number of worrying presuppositions, notably that the two poles of blackness and whiteness are occupied by a kind of caesura or ellipsis, or a kind of dead end unspecified as such: "the *nègre* is not. Anymore than the white man." The scenario I want to look at is one in which what Moten calls Fanon's "pathological insistence on the pathological" is something that might be called a psychopolitics of atrophy, or possibly petrified life (as for example in the case histories that close *The Wretched of the Earth*), in which the colonial body is caught up in something like hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and psychosis.[68] Even if (as is largely the case here) that petrification is used as a metonym for colonial culture, the atrophy presupposed is only detectable as the heterogeneous movement of an originary division from which being and nothingness emerge. Conversely, that atrophy or lysis, in its very complication and its irrationality, obeys neither law nor representation but a mysterious commandment that comes to the black subject from his or her own history—perhaps even from his or her own body? And here, perhaps unavoidably, we would need to return to those pages in *Black Skin, White Masks* in which Fanon describes a black-white being who is on guard against his white-black self beginning with the very identity of the body that is and is not black, that is and is not dead.

We might say, as a matter of fact, that any reading of Fanon, today, begins effectively (and not by the utterance of a naïve hope) with the inescapability of this *mort à bout touchant*, with the always violent shock of its decrepitude, a lysis where the solidarity of self and language breaks down, neither of them permitting a diagnosis of internal renewal, however multiple and dialectical. The *n'est pas* that seems to be underlying the notion of black social life and death must not, however, be overestimated; it is part of an epistemological break, which compels us to revise the key reference points of Marxism, Freudianism, and phenomenology for how we conceive of the Fanonian object. As I see it, the word *object* must here be understood as a limit work or fragmentation: it does not refer to a series of ontological displacements or dislocations, but to the radically symbolic work of racialization; it exists only when caught up in the discourse of racialization (or rather it is *n'est pas* for the very reason that it signifies a kind of explosion, or dissemination; the abyssal aftermath of a black hole in words, meanings, and structures). Let us now

trace in more detail how the black subject is traversed by this object: this object that is *n'est pas*.

Having already defined the problem of the *n'est pas* in Chapter Two ("The Clinic as Praxis"), I will discuss the psychopolitical implications of the term as Fanon elaborated them. It seems to me necessary to remind those who accuse Fanon of a fundamental pathology to return to the category of wretchedness, which Fanon places at the heart of the subject who is *n'est pas*. Inasmuch as decolonial revolution (understood as such) implies a remarkable reinvention of sovereignty, Fanon's notion of wretchedness compels us to conceive of revolutionary liberation no longer in terms of a sovereign decision or desire but as the very exercise of a suspicion of, or a discomfort with, the traditional discourse or literature of sovereignty. We can even, with a certain temerity, give this suspicion an historical dimension, as a refusal of any sovereign claim to master blackness or assume responsibility for it, which in its grandiose form prescribes decolonialism itself as a therapeutic result and cathartic demand. The disavowed reading of Fanon's text (of which afro-optimism is the latest example) would be one then that claims this mastery in a way unknown to itself. It raises the political question of reading—of how we should take responsibility for the interventions of Fanon's own text—but fails to interrogate the blindnesses of its own pious optimism. As such, it falls victim to its own pessimistic thinking of possibility, presenting Fanon's statements on invention as if they fell into a naïve optimistic outlook rather than the attempt to describe a new politics of affirmation. Again, afro-pessimism is closer to Fanon here in so far as it claims that black social death only becomes intelligible when seen against the background of the issues and questions generated by states of institutional and political states of emergency. The wretched are neither a foundation nor anti-foundation, but the figure of a dislocation at the heart of modern sovereignty. Only thus do they come into being. What manifests itself as the law's inner decay in the colony is the fact that rule of law is, in the final analysis, incomprehensible without the wretchedness that ruins it, without which law's ultimate justification or legitimation would not exist sovereignly. For this reason, afro-pessimism can be seen as a particularly refined instance of black optimism, and one that also reveals immediately why it is simultaneously an illustration of the "case" that, according to Moten in his reading of Fanon, is necessarily difficult and hard to grasp.

V. THE ANTINOMY

This new conjunction of wretchedness and non-sovereignty, which I have just mentioned, might provisionally be called, for lack of a better name, an *antinomy*, since it implies that there is a form of death in life whose everyday struggle expresses a *décalage* or cleavage between sovereign life and black being. Now, this death in life that is *n'est pas* cannot be identified with humanism, even in a new form; or in any case, humanism is far from exhausting it. It involves a perspective of an altogether different scope, whose object cannot be constituted as a simple accident of form but by the very relation between blackness and knowledge. This perspective does not imply a lack of interest in humanity, but, on the contrary, a continual return to the racial "truths," however archaic, in which whiteness is the only proper form of human being. Certain of these truths still have a power of provocation, in respect to a certain idea of language and culture, and for this reason, we must not fail to consider them. What follows will be taken up in more detail in Part Two.

1. One of the common misreadings of Fanon's theory of violence is to read it as an Hegelian struggle or, at least, as positing the struggle between colonizer and colonized as a version of the fight for prestige between master and slave: violence therefore has a progressive purpose in making the colonized the subject of a recognition rather than the thing (*chose*) that is not recognized.[69] Hence, violence is humanized as a fundamental category of human being. I am not saying that this reading is wrong, and certain aspects of it could be read into *Black Skin, White Masks*; but in *The Wretched of the Earth* decolonial violence is far from its Hegelian origin and refers to a struggle that is not *to* the death, but is *with* and *from* death, a struggle that seeks to go beyond the death in life that, however dialectical, no philosophical anthropology has yet grasped, and that reveals a certain aporia within the language of sovereignty.

Decolonial violence, which I have just said is not a dialectic, is engaged in a detoxification that is radically reinventive, since it implies that decolonialism cannot be identified with a politics, even in a progressive form, but with a language yet to be written. It leads to a tabula rasa, bringing a judgment into play, but one without jurisdiction. This violence receives extremely various contours and expressions, but one thing seems certain: the moment of invention is an event without sense or content; consequently, its appearance always exceeds the representational forms of the political. As a tabula rasa, violence has nothing to do with either right nor justice: in a

sense it only takes place as a case, but this is a case that falls without order or meaning, through which the colonized is only able to express itself disarticulately. As such, it marks the absence of person and of law, and is an advent without jurisdiction. If this is criminality, at least in its decision and pathos, it concerns itself with the blackness that falls, in principle, always outside of law. Or, more precisely, decolonial violence plunges the subject into an abyss whose meaning (Fanon uses the word "measure") is always unprecedented. *N'est pas*.

2. A second principle, especially important with regard to how we read Fanon's psychopolitics, is that blackness cannot be considered an unambivalent form of *pleasure*. In his reading of how nativism inures itself to colonial repression, where every cultural value is the product of a collective punishment, pleasure (religious, pagan, aesthetic) comes to have the following resonance: there is something frenetic, ghostly, hysterical about it. Fanon writes: "This magical superstructure which permeates native society fulfills certain well-defined functions in the dynamism of the libido," and "we perceive that all is settled by a permanent confrontation on the phantasmic plane."[70] Here law itself becomes magical; in its erotic jurisdiction the subject is not so much presented as inhibited, precisely by the ecstasies that terrify and at the same reassure it and that remedy the "pure force" of colonialism by an erotism that delimits itself within the limiting force of colonialism.[71] As such, the real violence of the colony becomes indiscernible from the magical superstructure of nativism (its foundation as libido, as terrifying figuration), which it claims as a more archaic form of its own jurisdiction. Defined as law, pleasure—which might be called an eros of subjugation to be distinguished from that of masochism—signifies the institution of an "avoidance" that is itself disavowed, and represents a dissociation that is essentially turned in upon itself.

3. Moreover, from a methodological point of view, Fanon's writing on black art accustoms us to a form of libidinal economy that, at the level of psyche and culture, both "protects and permits."[72] The economy hitherto that sees art as sublimation, which must immediately be seen as a *work* (of translation), is here deciphered as an "open book" and at the same time as a *de facto* abandonment to a world of dangerous and dogmatic fictions.[73] Fanon's analyses suggest, on the one hand, that we distinguish levels of dislocation and describe the distinctive elements by which black art is able to establish a completely new form beyond judicial reason; and on the other, he asks us to recognize that, unlike nativist and colonialist practices, these

forms make possible something else, as "the imagination is let loose outside the bounds of the colonial order."[74] As Sexton has observed, it is the discovery of this passage that gives Fanon's reflections on "life and death, pessimism and optimism, subject and object, thing and case, blacks and blackness, and so on" the tone of an affirmation written, it seems to me, from a position that is both within and without, within *as* without the political life of blackness.[75]

4. There remains to be discussed one last Fanonian notion, which may illuminate the figure of blackness at its very center, since it concerns the motif of slavery. In the chapter on recognition in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon refers to a governing system of "fictions" that prevents the black from encountering the world as object: the subject that seeks to know itself through its history, whether in the aspects of master or of slave, must confront the object so as to lose it and so gain its personhood, not so much in the objectivity of the given as in the form of ethical social life. Hence, it is possible to see in Fanon's commentaries on Adler and Hegel a blackness that is itself a fiction, that exists only through and as fiction, whose fictioning conforms to different levels of alienated life: political, economic, and ontological. This unity of the fictitious and the repressed authorizes Fanon's rereading of phenomenology and psychopathology: blackness can only in sum recognize itself as a fiction, which is why it turns away from the Other and from any dialectical resolution of itself as a labor that produces and sublates. It is in terms of this impasse that blackness figures the very being of the case that bars it from having both form and content. The black cannot put blackness to work—at least in the way that slavery is thought in metaphysics—for its "governing fiction" involves the resolution of figures, that is metaphors, or signs, that are absolutely self-referential and contained to the exclusion of anything else, figures and fictions whose action can increasingly be defined as a refusal of a *black* logic of the subject.[76] It is in this perspective that blackness is only ever going to be the subject of a limitation that is the limit of its own fictioning, and first of all insofar as the mirror whose whiteness it masks befalls it as a *n'est pas*.

CONCLUSION

This opening discussion of psychopolitics and war has been highly relevant to the purpose I had in view, namely to connect Fanon's work as a psychiatrist, or as a thinker of *socialthérapie*, to his politics elaborated in the con-

text of decolonial war. In the light of this, we are now compelled to ask what can be ascertained about Fanon's cultural theory in general. What that theory teaches us about the social life of blackness, or the imagining of its concept, I shall explain in Part Two, where I propose to discuss key themes and tropes as well as key intellectual figures.